

XXXIV. MY FATHER'S SECOND MARRIAGE

MY father was forty-eight when he took as his second wife Avdotia Vassilievna Epifanov.

I suspect that when, that spring, he had departed for the country with the girls, he had been in that communicatively happy, sociable mood in which gamblers usually find themselves who have retired from play after winning large stakes. He had felt that he still had a fortune left to him which, so long as he did not squander it on gaming, might be used for our advancement in life. Moreover, it was springtime, he was unexpectedly well supplied with ready money, he was alone, and he had nothing to do. As he conversed with Jakoff on various matters, and remembered both the interminable suit with the Epifanovs and Avdotia's beauty (it was a long while since he had seen her), I can imagine him saying: "How do you think we ought to act in this suit, Jakoff? My idea is simply to let the cursed land go. Eh? What do you think about it?" I can imagine, too, how, thus interrogated, Jakoff twirled his fingers behind his back in a deprecatory sort of way, and proceeded to argue that it all the same, "Peter Alexandritch, we are in the right." Nevertheless, I further conjecture, Papa ordered the dogcart to be got ready, put on his fashionable olive-coloured driving-coat, brushed up the remnants of his hair, sprinkled his clothes with scent, and, greatly pleased to think that he was acting a la seignior (as well as, even more, revelling in the prospect of soon seeing a pretty woman), drove off to visit his neighbours.

I can imagine, too, that when the flustered housemaid ran to inform Peter Vassilievitch that Monsieur Irtenieff himself had called, Peter answered angrily, "Well, what has he come for?" and, stepping softly about the house, first went into his study to put on his old soiled jacket, and then sent down word to the cook that on no account whatever--no, not even if she were ordered to do so by the mistress herself--was she to add anything to luncheon.

Since, later, I often saw Papa with Peter, I can form a very good idea of this first interview between them. I can imagine that, despite Papa's proposal to end the suit in a peaceful manner, Peter was morose and resentful at the thought of having sacrificed his career to his mother, and at Papa having done nothing of the kind--a by no means surprising circumstance, Peter probably said to himself. Next, I can see Papa taking no notice of this ill-humour, but cracking quips and jests, while Peter gradually found himself forced to treat him as a humorist with whom he felt offended one moment and inclined to be reconciled the next. Indeed, with his instinct for making fun of everything, Papa often used to address Peter as "Colonel;" and though I can remember Peter once replying, with an unusually violent stutter and his face scarlet with indignation, that he had never been a c-c-colonel, but only a l-l-lieutenant, Papa called him "Colonel" again before another five minutes were out.

Lubotshka told me that, up to the time of Woloda's and my arrival from

Moscow, there had been daily meetings with the Epifanovs, and that things had been very lively, since Papa, who had a genius for arranging, everything with a touch of originality and wit, as well as in a simple and refined manner, had devised shooting and fishing parties and fireworks for the Epifanovs' benefit. All these festivities--so said Lubotshka--would have gone off splendidly but for the intolerable Peter, who had spoilt everything by his puffing and stuttering. After our coming, however, the Epifanovs only visited us twice, and we went once to their house, while after St. Peter's Day (on which, it being Papa's nameday, the Epifanovs called upon us in common with a crowd of other guests) our relations with that family came entirely to an end, and, in future, only Papa went to see them.

During the brief period when I had opportunities of seeing Papa and Dunetchka (as her mother called Avdotia) together, this is what I remarked about them. Papa remained unceasingly in the same buoyant mood as had so greatly struck me on the day after our arrival. So gay and youthful and full of life and happy did he seem that the beams of his felicity extended themselves to all around him, and involuntarily communicated to them a similar frame of mind. He never stirred from Avdotia's side so long as she was in the room, but either kept on plying her with sugary-sweet compliments which made me feel ashamed for him or, with his gaze fixed upon her with an air at once passionate and complacent, sat hitching his shoulder and coughing as from time to time he smiled and whispered something in her ear. Yet throughout he wore the same expression of raillery as was peculiar to him even in the most

serious matters.

As a rule, Avdotia herself seemed to catch the infection of the happiness which sparkled at this period in Papa's large blue eyes; yet there were moments also when she would be seized with such a fit of shyness that I, who knew the feeling well, was full of sympathy and compassion as I regarded her embarrassment. At moments of this kind she seemed to be afraid of every glance and every movement--to be supposing that every one was looking at her, every one thinking of no one but her, and that unfavourably. She would glance timidly from one person to another, the colour coming and going in her cheeks, and then begin to talk loudly and defiantly, but, for the most part, nonsense; until presently, realising this, and supposing that Papa and every one else had heard her, she would blush more painfully than ever. Yet Papa never noticed her nonsense, for he was too much taken up with coughing and with gazing at her with his look of happy, triumphant devotion. I noticed, too, that, although these fits of shyness attacked Avdotia, without any visible cause, they not infrequently ensued upon Papa's mention of one or another young and beautiful woman. Frequent transitions from depression to that strange, awkward gaiety of hers to which I have referred before the repetition of favourite words and turns of speech of Papa's; the continuation of discussions with others which Papa had already begun--all these things, if my father had not been the principal actor in the matter and I had been a little older, would have explained to me the relations subsisting between him and Avdotia. At the time, however, I never surmised them--no, not even when

Papa received from her brother Peter a letter which so upset him that not again until the end of August did he go to call upon the Epifanovs'. Then, however, he began his visits once more, and ended by informing us, on the day before Woloda and I were to return to Moscow, that he was about to take Avdotia Vassilievna Epifanov to be his wife.